

Roll Call, March 25, 2009

The Capitol Visitor Center now offers special time slots for staff-led tours, after more than 50 Members of Congress complained that the CVC had curtailed one of their favorite constituent services.

The new time slots, added at 8:20 a.m., 8:40 a.m., 3:30 p.m. and 3:40 p.m., can only be reserved by Member offices, CVC spokesman Tom Fontana said.

CVC officials have also added 13 more training sessions for staffers, who must go through a course before giving a tour. That brings the total number of sessions between now and the end of July to 20, with at least one every week.

Fontana stressed that the CVC has only been open for a few months and is still in a “test-and-adjust period.”

“[We] recognize that some staff have had difficulty reserving staff-led tours,” he said. “We continue to scrutinize all of our policies and procedures related to staff-led tours and other operational components to determine where improvements can be made.”

CVC officials have already made some of those improvements. For example, staffers will now be able to lead constituents to the Hall of Columns, which Members complained was not on the original route. The Hall houses some of the state statues, making it a popular place to bring constituents. Officials are also considering allowing some tours into the Brumidi Corridors, which have been somewhat restricted since Sept. 11, 2001.

But some Members still aren’t completely satisfied — and worry about whether their constituents will be able to book a tour during the busy Easter recess. Before CVC officials added the extra time slots, tours had already filled up in February.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) said he will be working with Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) to ensure that staffers can give tours whenever they want, without going through CVC officials.

“Unfortunately, they still want to have a hammerlock on power and the ability to deny Members and their staff the right to give tours,” Kirk said. “The CVC reflects a museum administrative view as opposed to what this institution is, which is a working legislative building.”

Built for \$621 million, the CVC was billed as a security enhancer, a building where thousands of visitors would enter through one guarded opening. Officials also promised quick lines and comfort — a stark difference from the old system in which visitors were forced to wait outside for hours in the snow or heat.

In that way, the CVC has been successful. About 450,000 people have visited the CVC, waiting an average of six minutes on a peak day to get into the building.

But Kirk and 52 fellow Members are angered with the restrictions that have come with such security and amenities.

Staff-led tours are one of the few services that connect Members directly with their constituents. In the past, a staffer from the office would lead a small group around the Capitol, tailoring the tour to the Member’s state.

Now, every tour follows a regimented route, which excludes places like the underground tunnels. Most are led by “Red Coats,” the official Capitol tour guides. Staffers giving tours must go through a training session and book their tours through the CVC.

In their letter to acting Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers, the group of Members — numbering 12 Democrats and 41 Republicans — listed more than a dozen complaints, mostly referring to the control wielded by the CVC.

On Tuesday, lawmakers from the CVC's oversight committees had a closed-door meeting with visitor center officials to discuss the complaints.

Ayers and Terrie Rouse, the CVC's CEO of visitor services, met with Wasserman Schultz and Reps. Robert Brady (D-Pa.), Dan Lungren (R-Calif.) and Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.), according to Wasserman Schultz spokesman Jonathan Beeton.

Wasserman Schultz and Aderholt are the chairwoman and ranking member, respectively, of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, while Brady and Lungren are the chairman and ranking member of the House Administration Committee.

The meeting helped ensure that all the Members' issues have been addressed before the recess, which is a busy time for the CVC, Beeton said. After the break, the lawmakers will hold a public hearing to discuss how tours were handled during that time.

Kirk said he would be "working very closely" with Wasserman Schultz, who held dozens of often-critical oversight hearings in the months before the CVC opened.

"No Members or staffers should have to ask a Red Coat if they can give a tour," Kirk said. "The CVC has set up an enormous bureaucracy, which very quickly has become unfriendly to constituents."